

It's about time: Using electronic literature discussion groups with adult learners

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Online literacy discussion groups can improve learning and foster classroom community.

A confession. I do not frequent chat rooms. Instant messaging does not appeal to me. In my world, even listservs are something to be avoided. I like “old-fashioned” talk—face-to-face talk where I can see as well as hear the person with whom I am speaking. Conversations that are connected to a particular time and place make more sense to me than those that are typed on a screen and sent out into cyberspace. And yet more than once I have wondered if my students felt the same way. Having grown up with computers, video games, cellular phones, and pagers, it seems likely that they would be more technologically savvy than I. Perhaps because of this, they would find talking online meaningful and engaging. Were my preferences limiting what my students and I could accomplish? Would adding online discussions to one of my graduate literacy courses enhance the teaching and learning that took place in that class?

Research seems to suggest that the truth lies somewhere between what I prefer and what I thought students might prefer. A number of studies propose that a combination of face-to-face instruction and online opportunities for discussion does improve learning (Althaus, 1997; Ellis & Calvo, 2004; Levin, 2000; Staarman, 2003; Tu &

Corry, 2003; Williams & Murphy, 2002). In fact, Lindsey-North (2000) suggested that electronic discussions have the potential to foster classroom community, provide a forum for exploration of topics not covered fully in class, and help faculty meet individual student needs. However, she also pointed out that technology is most often used to deliver instruction rather

than to help students refine their understanding and construct new knowledge (Lindsey-North). These findings intrigued me. With limited time to devote to literature discussion groups, I sometimes left class feeling vaguely dissatisfied. There seemed to be so much more we could have said if only we had more time. Would online discussions be a way to both extend and enhance my students' conversations about books? Would the use of technology help to meet individual needs? Could the addition of “electronic talk” possibly foster classroom community?

It's important for students to leave my class on using children's and adolescent literature in the curriculum with the understanding that talk is an important part of reading and literacy instruction (International Reading Association & National Council of Teachers of English, 1996). Whether we like a book, or agree with an author, most of us have a desire to talk with others about what we are reading. We want to share what we're thinking, feeling, and learning. We're also interested in knowing what other people think. Are their reactions similar to ours or do they see

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things differently? Thought-provoking and relevant conversations expose us to different ways of organizing and interpreting information. They also provide us with opportunities to try out ideas, sort out what we've learned, develop deeper understandings, and formulate new questions. At times, they may even cause us to reevaluate our initial impressions or understandings (Holt & Bell, 2000; Smith, 1988). Peterson and Eeds (1990) referred to this kind of discussion as grand conversations.

The purpose of this study was to investigate the effect that participating in online literature discussions would have on the discourse and learning of adult students. Would electronic literature (e-lit) discussions promote grand conversations? Would students feel that e-lit discussions enhanced their understanding of what they read, and, if so, in what ways did they believe the electronic discussions enhanced their learning? Could the electronic discussions meet individual student needs, and, if so, how? Would electronic discussions foster community? Finally, what would I learn about instruction from these conversations?

Getting started

The participants in this investigation were 40 students enrolled in two sections of a graduate literacy course at a university in the eastern United States. The focus of the course was using children's and young adult (YA) literature to teach literacy in K–12 settings. On the first night of class, students completed a survey that asked about their interest in the course and their reading and computer habits. The results of the survey suggested that all of the students were looking forward to reading and learning more about children's and YA literature. All but 2 students said they enjoyed talking with others about what they read. Only 3 of the 40 students were members of a community book group.

However, over a quarter of the class reported enjoying chatting online. Most believed that their skill level with computers could best be

described as intermediate, but only 20% of the class had used Blackboard. Blackboard is a course website managed by the university computing center that professors may use in their courses. Students who had experience with Blackboard reported that the sites in other classes were mainly used to distribute reading materials and syllabi and to post assignments and relevant class announcements. A few were familiar with using Blackboard for online discussions.

Because only a small percentage of the students were experienced Blackboard users, it seemed important to make sure that students were adept at accessing our class's Blackboard website and comfortable with its features before we began the electronic discussions. To encourage students to visit, I posted class materials, such as an interactive syllabus and library reserve materials, on the site. In addition, I asked students to visit the website during the first several weeks of class. An announcement directed them to the Magic Pencil (www.bl.uk/whatson/exhibitions/magicpencil/highlights.html), an online exhibit housed on the British Library's website that features interviews with and samples of the work of 13 innovative picture book illustrators. The exhibition contains an e-postcard feature that encourages visitors to send an e-mail containing their favorite illustration to someone they know. Students were told in the announcement that if they sent a postcard to me explaining which illustrator's work they favored, I would enter them in a drawing for a children's book. Students enjoyed this activity and wrote very thoughtfully about the illustrations they had chosen. The contest helped me to find out who was having difficulty accessing and navigating the class website, and it also helped students to become familiar with Blackboard and writing responses online.

Early on in the semester, students in each class were assigned to one of five literature discussion groups. These groups remained intact for the entire semester. Before the online discussions occurred, groups discussed the following seven books in class: *Caps for Sale* (Slobodkina, 1947),

Table 1
Rubric for electronic literature circles

Key criteria for evaluating work:

- Excellent work for online literature circles will contain original, well-developed ideas about the author's craft or make insightful text-to-text, text-to-world, or text-to-self connections. Text-to-self connections may include a description of how the student is creating meaning as he or she reads. Questions and musings ("I wonder why...?") are also appropriate. Discussion includes appropriate examples from the text. In addition, excellent work introduces a new idea or stimulates discussion. Excellent work contains at least three postings (two of which mention other postings). Work is posted on time.
- Acceptable work will contain well-developed ideas about the author's craft or make text-to-text, text-to-world, or text-to-self connections. Discussion includes appropriate examples from the text. Acceptable work contains at least three postings (two of which mention other postings). Work is posted on time.
- Marginal work contains obvious or undeveloped ideas about the author's craft or connections to text. Examples may or may not be present. Or it does not contain the required number of postings or is not posted on time.
- Unacceptable work fails to comment on craft or connections to text or does not contain three postings.

The Hatseller and the Monkeys (Diakite, 1999), *Seedfolks* (Fleischman, 1997), *Swamp Angel* (Isaacs, 1994), *Chato's Kitchen* (Soto, 1995), *The Secret Garden* (Burnett, 1911/1989), and *Because of Winn-Dixie* (DiCamillo, 2000). Discussions centered upon student responses and connections made to the text, questions about the text, and observations about the author's craft (e.g., voice, plot, theme, characterization, setting). Illustrations were also analyzed and evaluated when picture books were discussed.

Students were required to bring a short written response and an analysis of each book to class on the day of discussion. I collected and graded these written responses or Analysis Cards (A-Cards) after each discussion. I hoped the A-Cards would help students gather their thoughts ahead of time and provide focus and a place to begin each discussion. I also hoped that having written notes would encourage quiet students to participate more readily in the conversations.

Students had about 30 minutes of "talking time" in their literature discussion groups before

the class reconvened and groups shared their observations and reflections. I joined one or two of the groups each week. Participating in the discussions helped me to gauge the quality of the conversations taking place and to determine the ideas I wanted the class to explore during whole-class discussion time.

By the time the e-lit group discussions were about to begin, students had developed a comfort level within their groups and were experienced in talking about children's and YA literature in terms of craft and connections. Everyone was also able to log onto Blackboard and was at least somewhat familiar with the site's features. Two weeks before the e-lit discussions began, I demonstrated how to access and use the discussion board feature and provided students with a set of written directions.

I also reviewed the assignment and the grading rubric with both classes (see Table 1). The assignment required students to read the same novel and to post at least three well-developed and insightful comments about the book on their group's discussion board. Students

were also directed to respond to the comments made by others. The discussions spanned a two-week period and because many students were juggling work, family, and classes, I decided the discussions would be asynchronous. This meant that rather than logging on at the same time and discussing in real time, students could log on and post their comments any time day or night during the two weeks. An asynchronous format was chosen because I thought it would be most convenient for students; however, I would come to find that this one decision influenced the discussion.

The book I selected for the electronic discussions was *Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry* (1976) by Mildred D. Taylor. The novel chronicles a pivotal year in the life of Cassie Logan, a 10-year-old African American girl growing up in rural Mississippi at the height of the Great Depression. It is a coming-of-age year for Cassie—a year when she becomes fully aware of how the wider society uses race to define her and the members of her family. But what is more important is that Cassie learns from her family and community how to define herself and to retain her self-respect, integrity, and independence in the face of racism. The Logans are second-generation landowners, and the 400 acres they own afford them a degree of autonomy and independence that is rare for most African Americans during this time. However, owning land also makes the family vulnerable; they are viewed by many of their white neighbors with suspicion and resentment. Some would like nothing better than to see the Logans lose their land and with it their independence. How Cassie and her family navigate a perilous time in their lives makes for compelling reading and lively discussion.

Before beginning to read and discuss the book online, groups devised reading and responding schedules. Because students were required to post messages at least three times over the two weeks of discussion, most of the groups divided the book into thirds and set dates by which group members were to respond to each

section. Several groups, however, chose to read the book in its entirety and then respond.

Let the discussions begin!

The first week of discussion brought a flurry of messages from students to me or to one another about how exciting and enjoyable the assignment was turning out to be. There were also a few messages about frozen screens and individual difficulties with Internet servers or accessing Blackboard. But by the end of the week everyone had posted a message at least once and discussions were in full swing. Student postings contained comments about craft, theme, personal connections, connections to other texts, and connections to the wider world. For example, a number of students remarked on Taylor's finely crafted characters and descriptions. Over and over again, members of all the groups wrote how they felt as if they were "right there" with Cassie and her family. And although the majority of the students were European American, many made personal connections with the Logan family. Some commented on how Cassie's relationships with her brothers reminded them of their relationships with their siblings. Others discussed having had a friend like the character TJ.

Students also posed questions and asked others to help clear up confusions. Several particularly interesting conversations began with questions about the importance of the land. For example, in one of her postings, Cathy said that, in her experience, religion is often a focal point of stories set in the South, but that didn't seem to be the case in *Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry* (Taylor, 1976). Jennifer answered that she was thinking the same thing but began to wonder if the land somehow took the place of religion for the family. Jonette joined the discussion by first telling her group that she thought the religious question was great and that Jen "made a wonderful point about the land taking religion's place in the story." She believed, however, that religion was important to the family; it just wasn't a central element in the

story. She continued, "I'm not sure you gals understand the importance of land to Black people," and then explained why owning land was and still is so significant. She ended by connecting what is occurring in the book with the present day.

If any of you know the film director Spike Lee, his company is named Forty Acres and a Mule. The name signifies land taken away from our Black ancestors (much like what was trying to occur in *Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry*). It also goes hand in hand with the whole reparations idea here in the U.S.—owing [descendants] of slaves land, \$\$, or some kind of payback.

This conversation and others like it occurred without much prompting from me. My initial posting simply read, "Please share your observations, connections, and questions on this award-winning piece of historical fiction." Of course, students had done similar work in class and knew that I would be reading their entries over the two-week period and that their responses would be graded. It was interesting that during the in-class debriefing, a number of students teased fellow group members good-naturedly about how "certain people's responses had raised the bar" for everyone else's responses. It was obvious from subsequent feedback that the quality of classmates' entries reinforced the expectations laid out in the rubric.

Students posted 225 messages over the two weeks. All students responded at least the required three times, and most responded more than three times. Of those who commented more than the required number of times, some wrote a mixture of long (several paragraphs) and short (several sentences) entries, but most posted fairly lengthy entries. Even though I was listed as a member of each group on the discussion board, I was only asked to join the conversations on two occasions. One group asked me a question about a character while another simply relayed enjoying the assignment. I responded to both postings, but did not comment otherwise. It was clear from the number

and quality of postings that the groups were able to function without my direct participation.

Wrap-up and student reflections

A wrap-up discussion took place in class at the end of the two weeks. Students were asked first to answer individually the following four questions in writing: (1) What is your overall reaction to the e-lit discussions? (2) What do you see as the benefits of e-lit discussions? (3) What do you see as the drawbacks? (4) What suggestions do you have to improve the assignment/experience? Groups then met for 30 minutes to exchange final comments about the book and to discuss their experiences talking online. Afterward, there was a whole-class discussion and debriefing about the experience, during which I took notes.

To prepare for the in-class discussion and debriefing session, I printed out and read every entry from the electronic discussions. I also counted the total number of entries and the entries of each of the students. Each student's entries were evaluated according to the criteria set forth on the rubric. After I had grouped the students' written feedback into categories and reviewed the notes I took during the whole-class debriefings, I sifted through the responses for patterns.

The overall pattern that emerged was that the students believed that discussing a book online over a period of time enhanced both their individual understandings and the quality of their group's discussion. Why did they feel this way? First, the e-lit format in contrast to the "live" discussions in class gave students time—time to think before responding, time to gather and organize their thoughts, and time to voice their thoughts fully without interruption. The following comments reflect how important having time before responding was to the majority of the students.

I enjoyed this type of discussion. When speaking with-in a group, my mind shifts from here to there with each comment made. I easily lose my train of thought or forget the points I want to make. If I jot them down, I lose part of the discussion. I liked being able to sit back, and think about my responses so that I could get my point across just right. Nothing was lost—there were no distractions or interruptions.

Tina

I enjoyed the experience of talking online much more than I imagined I would. Responding to comments before me that I could read and reread and think about before responding was a totally different experience than the in-class discussions. I could stop and look up a passage for confirmation without the discussion passing me by. I also tend to internalize my thoughts and reactions and this method made it much easier and less threatening to share.

Cathy

I enjoyed the online experience better (than the in-class discussions) because I was able to read the book, gather my thoughts, read my classmates thoughts and regather mine before writing/discussing. In class discussions are more rushed, and I don't have enough time to ponder and reflect.

Amy

Students also relayed that, at times, a particularly insightful or intriguing idea came to them after a discussion in class was over. They reported that this often happened as they were driving home after class. Naturally, they wanted to tell someone, but how and when? They wouldn't see their group for another week, and by then a different text would be under discussion. Just as frustrating was that, at times, during the in-class conversations, they would be interrupted while sharing their ideas, or the direction of the conversation would shift before they had a chance to say all they wanted to say. Because the electronic discussions continued over a period of time, sharing a new thought or insight was easy. Even better, someone was bound to respond to them. Likewise, because the discussions were not "live," students could say/write their piece without being interrupted. In addition, it was always possible to return to a particular topic or idea. For example,

in one of her final entries, Marilyn chose to revisit her initial posting.

As I mentioned in my first communication, I have read books about segregation in a sterile, detached environment. The author has been successful with her choice of a female protagonist as the narrator to reiterate these tragic events in a way that brings the reader in. Now I have experienced a personal connection. One of my colleagues is a first-grade teacher who is African American. She saw me reading this book and told me that she loved reading this book when she was in fifth grade. We then had a discussion about the book, and our discussion turned to how each of us reacted to the book based on our personal history.

Marilyn went on to explain how her colleague's experiences growing up mirrored the experiences of the characters in the book. It was obviously important for Marilyn to share what she had just learned and to connect this new information to thoughts she had at the beginning of the discussion.

But did these perceived advantages lead to what Peterson and Eeds (1990) called grand conversations? Did discussing a book online in an asynchronous format provide students with opportunities to sort out what they were thinking about the text, to develop deeper understandings, and to rethink or reexamine their ideas? Again, student feedback, such as the following, suggests that participating in e-lit discussions enhanced their understandings of the text and, at times, caused them to reevaluate their thinking.

Personally I enjoyed the opportunity to discuss the book frequently before we finished reading it. That was an experience that we cannot enjoy in class. Other people's comments and questions made me question, reconsider or think about different aspects of the story that had not entered my mind.

Jennifer

I found it very helpful as well as enjoyable to see other group members' reactions to the story. Through my e-lit group I was able to get other opinions about the book. This helped me to expand my own thinking and develop new ideas. We were also able to ask and answer questions within the group.

Ray

The biggest benefit for me was to hear what others had to say. More than once a comment made by a group member caused me to reread a section of the story or ponder an idea I hadn't thought of.

Paula

I really enjoyed the e-literature discussion experience. It really reminded me of how much of reading is thinking—I kind of felt like I was in constant “think aloud” mode.

Rebecca

It seems that being able to read, reflect, and respond in one's own time did more to meet individual needs than anything else. Most students reported that they read what their classmates wrote and then spent however much time they needed to think about and formulate their responses. However, several students printed the postings, read them, spent time thinking, and then formulated their responses. One student printed the postings, read them, highlighted what she found interesting, reread the highlighted parts, brainstormed responses, and then responded. At the end of the experience she wrote, “This (being able to approach the assignment in her own way and time) was definitely a part of the process that I appreciated. I like being given time to think and organize my thoughts.”

Being able to enter the conversation at various points also seems to have played a part in meeting individual needs. Some students mentioned that they chose not to be the first person to comment because they like to “piggyback” on classmates' ideas, while others preferred to initiate the conversation. Students also pointed out that the electronic format allowed shy or quieter students to participate more fully and comfortably. As one student said, “Being able to make comments online was nice for those of us who tend to be shy in class.” Wickstrom (2003) reported a similar finding when she incorporated an online open forum for undergraduate education students enrolled in a reading assessment course.

To a certain extent, it seems as though the online discussions also fostered classroom

community. Students said that unlike class discussions where it is possible for one or two people to dominate, in an electronic discussion, everyone has an equal opportunity to share ideas and thoughts. It is interesting that students felt no one dominated the online discussions even though some people posted more comments than others. In addition, during the debriefing session, several students mentioned how impressed they had been by the postings of quieter students. This peer recognition, along with the increase in their participation online, might have helped quieter students feel a greater sense of belonging. Students who identified themselves as “quiet” expressed being more comfortable with the electronic format, but none of their feedback suggested that the experience affected their participation in class.

It is important to note that students were in complete agreement that much of the success of the electronic discussions was due to the climate of the “real” classroom. Students reported that the extensive group and whole-class discussions had been instrumental in building rapport and creating an atmosphere that encouraged intellectual risk taking. They believed that without this they would have been much less willing to ask questions or raise potentially controversial topics. One student pointed out that if she had not had the in-class experiences, her online comments would have been of a superficial nature rather than the meaningful conversations she had during the electronic discussions.

Although the things students viewed as drawbacks to the electronic format were highly individual, several seemed to fall into one of two categories. The first had to do with missing the immediacy that comes with real-life conversation. Four of the 40 students said they would have preferred real-time discussion. Another student was disappointed when no one responded to her posting within a day or two. One very talkative student said she missed the spontaneity of the classroom discussions.

The second drawback had to do with the technology itself. Several students mentioned the frustration that came when their home computer crashed or when the Blackboard system was down. One student said she was embarrassed to admit that she always relied on her husband to do her work on the computer, and he wasn't always available when she wanted to respond. Another student said her typing skills made participation somewhat laborious. Several students found the format for responding on Blackboard (a small box-like space on the screen) awkward to use.

Almost everyone suggested that I continue using the electronic discussion assignment or that I increase the number of electronic discussions. Other suggestions addressed individual students' concerns: having real-time discussions, making this a nongraded assignment, having everyone finish the book before the discussion, or dividing the book into smaller segments.

What I learned

The most valuable thing I learned was how important it is to continually question my assumptions and instructional practices. For example, because I prefer face-to-face discussions and successfully use them in class, I had difficulty envisioning the benefits of electronic discussions. Because I pride myself on being able to create classroom communities where all are teachers and learners, I had a hard time imagining how technology could improve upon what I do. Obviously, pride does go before the fall. Students' comments clearly suggest that electronic discussions provide things I cannot provide in class, such as varying the amount of time individual students have for reflection and responding or providing opportunities for students to participate in ongoing discussions.

Moreover, the electronic-discussion format allowed students to engage in grand conversations. Certainly some of this can be attributed to the fact that, by its very nature, writing requires more thought than conversation does (Tu &

Corry, 2003), but students had also written before the in-class discussions (Analysis Cards). Again it seems to me that what my students called the "luxury of time" influenced the quality of the conversations.

I was also interested in how students reacted to seeing their peers' ideas in print. No one indicated that they were embarrassed to have peers read their work (Wickstrom, 2003). However, the gentle teasing of particularly articulate students during the debriefing sessions suggests that students were, in turn, inspired and intimidated by their classmates' written work. One student wrote, "I was nervous to start because when I saw Craig's comments, they were much more in-depth and more developed than I expected." While some students may have wished their fellow classmates wrote less insightful entries, I was delighted. Rather than being teacher directed, the conversations were directed by the students. Unlike in class, where all eyes often turn to me, students turned to one another for clarification or affirmation. Even better, reading one another's work prompted students to set expectations for the assignment that surpassed the expectations outlined on my rubric. I might have set the assignment up, but students took responsibility for the teaching and learning that occurred.

Finally, I was reminded that, as with any instructional strategy, electronic discussions must be planned with care. I thought it would be important for students to be comfortable with one another before they talked online, so I made sure groups worked together a number of times before the e-lit discussions began. The Analysis Cards and small-group and whole-class discussions about books provided students with practice in talking about craft and connections. As a result, students were able to hold discussions online without any prompting from me. Because very few of the students had experience with online discussions and earning a grade for their "electronic talk," I created a rubric to provide guidance and lessen anxiety (see Table 1).

Another reason I think the e-lit discussions were successful was because I thought like a novice computer user as I planned the assignment. For example, I created the Magic Pencil activity because I realized that most of my students had little experience with Blackboard and writing online for class. I also thought including both a classroom demonstration of and written directions for accessing the discussion board would be helpful for students who were unfamiliar with discussion boards. As I planned, I kept thinking about what I, a novice user, would find useful. I think this approach eliminated potential confusions and difficulties.

Final thoughts

This study began with a question I had about the teaching and learning in my classroom. But how technology might enhance instruction is a question that many middle and secondary school teachers are also asking themselves. What can they take from my experience? First of all, novice computer users can take heart. Electronic discussion boards are easy to set up and use. I was concerned that the demands of the technology would be overwhelming for me and for the class, but they were not.

Using technology to communicate is second nature for many middle and secondary students. Chatting online, instant messaging, and text messaging are often preferred ways to converse. If students already enjoy "talking online," electronic discussions may be a way to encourage students to think and talk about what they are reading. While my experience showed that an electronic format was particularly inviting for quieter students, I think many young adults would find the format appealing.

Using online discussion in conjunction with in-class discussion is a way to continue and extend classroom conversations. This may be important when the entire class period is 40 to 50 minutes long and discussions seem to end just as they are beginning. What would happen if discussion moved beyond the classroom? In my class-

room, the quality of the discussion seemed to improve when students could respond outside of class in their own time. Perhaps something as simple as a discussion board, where a teacher and his or her students post things they wish they had said or thought of after class, would be a way to encourage student reflection. These comments could then be used to initiate discussion in class the following day.

My students and I found using online discussions to learn about literature very rewarding. In an age where multitasking and efficiency are prized, it is often difficult to find time for thinking and reflecting about our ideas and the ideas of others. Who would have thought that technology could be used to give my students the time they needed to have rich and compelling conversations? I had always viewed technology as the epitome of the impersonal and the efficient. Now I'm left wondering, "What next?"

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